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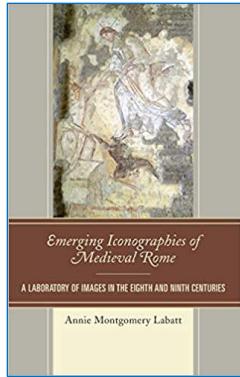
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Review of Annie Montgomery Labatt, *Emerging Iconographies of Medieval Rome: A Laboratory of Images in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2019.

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It is not often that an historian of art writes a book which convincingly calls into question long held beliefs about the origins and evolution of given stylistic phenomena. *Emerging Iconographies of Medieval Rome* by Annie Montgomery Labatt is such an achievement. With an amplitude of passion and knowledge of medieval Rome's surviving churches and Christian sites, Annie Labatt leaves no stone unturned as she reveals their icons, frescoes and mosaics in a fresh and unexpected context. The reader may feel hindered by the small black and white images that accompany the text, which are often difficult to decipher. And yet, to truly comprehend the artistic genius of medieval Rome requires an actual visit to the city's venerable sites. In lieu of this, *Emerging Iconographies of Medieval Rome* is a wellspring of critical thought and historic commentary, an encounter with a robust creative culture and treasures it engendered.

Labatt maintains that a new artistic vitality existed in eighth and ninth-century Rome due to papal sanction and geographic distance from the Byzantine East and the upheavals of Iconoclasm (730-787; 813-843) that prevailed there.¹ She confronts the widely accepted speculation that 8th and 9th-century Roman images are essentially early Byzantine, reasoning that the images themselves tell a very different story. Labatt's formal analysis of specific extant early medieval images is nourished by theology, patristic writings and history, often pertaining to Eastern Iconoclasm. She calls to task the methodology of the last century's great medievalists, Weitzman, Kitzinger, and Krautheimer, all of whom considered Rome "a passive recipient of Eastern imagery."² What results is a compelling defense of early medieval Rome as the cradle of flourishing creativity: a "laboratory of images" in its own right.

Emerging Iconographies of Medieval Rome investigates four subject matters present in Roman art of the 8th and 9th centuries: the Anastasis, the Transfiguration, the Maria Regina, and the Sickness of Hezekiah. Perhaps surprisingly, the book begins with an explanation of the Fitness Landscape diagrams used in evolutionary biology to depict levels of fitness (frequency of appearance) of a given organic attribute in nature (the higher peaks of a diagram correspond to a greater frequency of appearance). Fitness

¹ Annie Montgomery Labatt, *Emerging Iconographies of Medieval Rome, A Laboratory of Images in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 1.

² Labatt, 12.

Landscapes can illustrate other patterns as well (in this case the appearance of images in early medieval Rome and the East) which are indicative of the evolutionary trajectories of their various iconographies. Confirming the evolution of imagery via a scientific graphing system is a unique contribution of Labatt's formidable scholarship on medieval Rome's artistic independence.

The first iconography presented is the Anastasis (Christ's descent into Hell where the souls of the just awaited him, following his Passion and death). Christ's descent into "the lower parts of the earth" (Eph 4:9 DV) is alluded to by both Paul and Peter (1 Pet 4:6), though neither describes it in detail. The Anastasis is the characteristically Eastern image of redemption, but Labatt insists there is no proof that it originated in the East. The notion that it belongs solely to the East is challenged by Labatt's expertise on the earliest known depictions of the Anastasis - all in Roman churches, including Santa Maria Antiqua (705-707), Santa Prassede (c. 822), San Crisogono (7th – 8th century), Old St. Peter's (9th century), SS Giovanni e Paolo (8th -9th century) and San Clemente (9th century) (**Fig. 1**). With the exception of Santa Maria Antiqua and Santa Prassede, it appeared as part of passion cycles. Labatt observes that in the West, artistic programs conveyed narrative sequence and focus on Christ's human nature. This clarifies why images of Christ's Passion and Resurrection

(as part of chronological passion narratives) become prominent in the West, while the



Figure 1 Anastasis (fresco), San Clemente lower church, 9th century, Rome. Photo: <http://www.basilicasanclemente.com/eng/index.php/restoration/anastasis>

Anastasis disappears from Roman iconography. The Anastasis became a notable subject in Eastern Byzantine art only *after* it no longer appeared in Rome! Labatt explains that the Anastasis appealed to the spirituality of the East, where it became the standard image of the Resurrection, not only of Jesus, but of all mankind.

Unlike the Anastasis, the Transfiguration first appears in the East as a pre-Iconoclasm apse mosaic at St. Catherine's Monastery, Mt. Sinai (6th century). In the Byzantine world, the subject is prevalent by the 12th century, although it occurs occasionally in 12th-century Western decoration. Its substantial role in Western iconography matures only during the Renaissance. Labatt focuses on the Roman mosaic Transfigurations at SS Nereo ed Achilleo (815) and in the San Zeno Chapel (c. 822) at Santa Prassede (**Fig. 2**). As at Mt. Sinai, the Roman images are over an altar (though on



Figure 2 Transfiguration (mosaic), San Zeno Chapel, Santa Prassede, c. 822, Rome.

Photo: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Santa_Prassede-Transfiguration.jpg

a flat wall instead of a rounded apse) and depict Christ in a mandorla flanked by the prophets Moses and Elijah, with apostles Peter, James, and John as stunned witnesses. Labatt engages several debates about the symbolic and artistic significance of these Carolingian Transfigurations in order to understand their existence in Roman churches. For example, a point of contention among theologians is the interpretation of Peter's response to Christ's divinity which confronts him in the vision he just witnessed.³ Because several Church Fathers understood the Transfiguration as foreshadowing Christ's Second Coming, Labatt considers the significance of the juxtaposition of the San Zeno Transfiguration to other images of Peter situated within the chapel wherein the apostle seems called to direct his attention to Christ of the Transfiguration mosaic.⁴ Likewise, art historians recognize the Transfiguration as an other-worldly subject that lends itself to being depicted in mosaic made of shimmering colorful glass tesserae. The mosaic's reflective quality which enlivens its material surface may be likened to the physical transformation of Christ's body during his Transfiguration. By similar metaphysical reasoning, the Transfiguration also becomes a metaphor for the Eucharistic bread and wine that is mystically transformed into the body and blood of

³ Mat 17:4. Peter suggests making three tabernacles, for Christ, Moses, and Elijah. See Labatt, *Emerging Iconographies*, 118. Origen and "later exegetes also pointed to the severity of Peter's mistake...it was incorrect to propose three tabernacles of equal value when Christ is the most important."

⁴ Labatt, 120-121.

Christ at the consecration during the Mass.⁵ This would lend theological importance to the location over the altar of the Mt. Sinai and Roman Transfigurations. From Origen to John of Damascus, patristic explications on the mystery of the Transfiguration inform Labatt's belief that Rome's 9th-century Transfigurations were short-lived experiments. Yet, it is such experimentation that she sees as an expression of the artistic vibrancy of Carolingian Rome.

The next emerging iconography to be analyzed is the Maria Regina, the mother of God wearing imperial garb. Unlike the Anastasis and Transfiguration, the Maria Regina had no afterlife in the East. Santa Maria Antiqua in the Roman Forum is home to the earliest known Maria Regina (6th century) (**Fig 3**). The subject was often depicted later in Rome, at the Oratory of Old St. Peter's (705-707), Santa Maria in Trastevere (705-707), Santa Susanna (7th/8th century), San Clemente (9th century) and San Lorenzo fuori le Mura (9th century, now lost), among other sites. It is assumed that because the image of Mary as mother and queen appeared frequently, it must have held a special appeal for worshippers (as is proper to the icon's function).

While certain elements of 8th-century Roman Maria Reginas appear to stem from early Byzantine motifs, scholars remain divided as to the origin of the image. Labatt

⁵ Labatt, 148. Labatt interprets the 9th-century Transfigurations as images of the "metamorphosis of Christ, the transformation of his witnesses, the change that happens at the Eucharist...It is a work of art about art, through the transformation that images themselves bring about through earthly materials...that spoke with special force to the anxiety about images that drove the period of Iconoclasm."



Figure 3 Maria Regina (fresco), Santa Maria Antiqua, 6th century, Rome. Photo: B.

Hostetler. Used with permission.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/bradhostetler/28116288917/in/photostream/>

Figure 4 Maria Regina/ “Madonna della Clemenza” (tempera on wood), Santa Maria in Trastevere, 705-707, Rome. Photo: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madonna_della_Clemenza



ascertains that the
 Maria Regina
 would not appear
 in the East because
 “imperial regalia is
 already being used
 by the empress.”⁶
 Indeed, the case
 that this subject
 matter is

profoundly Roman is pivotal to the book’s overall thesis because it connotes the

⁶ Labatt, 180.

influence of papal authority on works of art during the crisis of Iconoclasm when Rome became the center of production of Christian imagery. Referring to Pope John VII (r. 705-707), Labatt reiterates Mary Stroll's argument first proposed by Hans Belting - that when Pope John declared himself the servant of the mother of God (**Fig. 4**),⁷ he was quietly stating that the personage "to whom he owed obedience was not the Byzantine emperor, but the heavenly queen."⁸ A similar argument by Thomas Noble is also referenced, that 8th-century popes such as John VII separated themselves from Byzantium and "very quickly fashioned an explicit message saying that their allegiance was not owed to anyone on earth."⁹ Labatt does not neglect Roman popular devotion to Mary. She suggests that a fresco fragment now in Dumbarton Oaks, the so-called "Catacomb Man" holding a candle (**Fig. 5**) may portray one man's fidelity to the mother of God. She expounds on the significance of votive candles as they appear in early medieval imagery. Like the Pope depicted kneeling before Mary in the Santa Maria in Trastevere icon, pious Romans also venerated the Heavenly Queen.

⁷ Pope John commissioned the Madonna of Clemency in Santa Maria in Trastevere. The Pope himself kneels at Mary's left knee.

⁸ Quoted in Mary Stroll, "Maria Regina, papal Symbol" in *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe*, ed. Anne J. Duggan (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1995), 177.

⁹ Quoted in Thomas F.X. Noble, "Topography, Celebration and Power: The Making of a Papal Rome in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries" in *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages*, eds. F. Theuvs, Mayke De Jong, and Carine van Rhijn (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 73.



Figure 5 Fresco of a Youth/ “Catacomb Man” (detail, tempera on plaster), 8th-9th century. Photo: Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC. Used with permission.
<http://museum.doaks.org/Obj35983?sid=276203&x=434611&sort=76>

The final ‘emerging iconography’ to be explored is unexpected and obscure, with a solitary appearance in Roman wall painting! This is the Sickness of Hezekiah (**Fig. 6**) on the west *transenna* wall in Santa Maria Antiqua (705-707). It is an unusual scene – King Hezekiah reclines, but his back is to the viewer and his face is hidden. In Isaiah 38:2 (DV), the prophet tells Hezekiah “Thus saith the Lord: Take order with thy

house, for thou shalt die and not live.” But with contrite heart, Hezekiah beseeches the Lord that he should live, and his prayer is heard. We then learn that on his sickbed, Hezekiah had written of his longing to see God (Isa 38:10-19). At this, Labatt ponders



Figure 6 Sickness of Hezekiah (fresco), Santa Maria Antigua, 707-707, Rome. Photo: B. Hostetler. Used with permission.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/bradhostetler/41174762290/>

the believers of both the Old and New Testament who long to see God's face. She suggests that the idea of seeing the face of God is indicated by two other images of the *transenna*, stories of decapitations! David and Goliath and Judith and Holofernes together form an ensemble with the reclining Hezekiah whose face we do not see. Labatt's argument is enticing - that the emphasis on facelessness in the ensemble is representative of the power of God - and even though the three scenes were created before the onset of Eastern Iconoclasm they may well signal "the theological

conversation which [Iconoclasm] came to draw on...the theological centrality of the face of God, and the face of Jesus as an 'image' of the face of God."¹⁰

Emerging Iconographies of Medieval Rome is an ambitious study that contextualizes 8th and 9th-century Rome as the center of a creative culture and crossroads of the theological, political and artistic tensions of the time. Its final chapter is a comprehensive conclusion from which the reader can glean the essential matter: the development of images is defined by both continuity and discontinuity which in medieval Rome is demonstrated by specific works that Labatt calls "good tries" that enjoyed momentary fitness in that specific time and place.¹¹ When all is said and done, Annie Labatt's voluminous scholarship contributes a convincing proposal to medieval art-historical inquiry. Rome in the 8th and 9th centuries developed a deliberate and distinct visual vocabulary that ebbed and flowed yet spread throughout the broader Mediterranean world to influence the various artistic traditions of medieval Christendom, including the Byzantine East as it recovered from the devastation of Iconoclasm. 🐼

¹⁰ Labatt, 233.

¹¹ Labatt, 304.